

Preparing for a Category 5 Hurricane

By Jean Barile, Office of Ship Operations

As the nation prepared for a Category 5 hurricane named Katrina, little did the Maritime Administration (MARAD) know the extent to which our people and our ships would be involved. Before the first wind gusts blew, MARAD managers gave Central Region employees administrative leave to take their families and seek shelter. Crews on MARAD's Ready Reserve Force (RRF) ships *Cape Kennedy* and *Cape Knox* "battened down the hatches"; they doubled mooring lines, secured decks from flying objects, and prepared to take aboard a few stranded evacuees from the impending hurricane.

Before the last raindrops fell, MARAD managers were already trying to assess the status of MARAD employees from the Central Region and the Beaumont Reserve Fleet (BRF), as well as RRF vessels, and the Port of New Orleans.

Our own colleagues were our first concern, and MARAD provided guidance to take care of immediate shelter and work concerns. Headquarters staff created websites to assist MARAD employees affected by the Katrina disaster, as well as those MARAD employees assisting with Katrina relief efforts. Headquarters provided a central call-in number for any employee trying to notify supervisors or co-workers of their location and status. After one week, only one employee was



Part of MARAD Headquarters Hurricane Katrina Hurricane Relief and Recovery Efforts Team with Deputy Maritime Administrator John Jamian (front row: center).

unaccounted for, and within another three days, that employee checked in. MARAD employees were a microcosm of the coastal gulf area.

Eighteen mooring lines broke on the *Cape Kennedy* and *Cape Knox*, and the ships shifted more than 200 feet down the Mississippi River. All in all, the ships rode out the weather in reasonably good condition. They had electricity (air conditioning and lights), food, water, and berths. Without being asked, vessel captains provided hot showers, meals, and a few moments of rest to emergency-response personnel, including local fire and rescue responders, within the Poland Street complex.

Port of New Orleans Director Larry LaGrange requested MARAD's assistance through FEMA to provide vessels for berthing to accommodate approximately 3,000 personnel who were anticipated to return to the area to open the Port of New Orleans. Vessels with the optimum berthing capacity included MARAD school ships. MARAD notified general agents to commence the activation and preparation for sail of the Training Ship *State of Maine*, the Training Ship *Empire State*, and the future Training Ship *Sirius*.

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Meanwhile, the Department of Transportation (DOT) requested permission of the Department of Defense (DOD) to use the RRF vessels, normally kept for DOD's use as strategic sealift vessels, for humanitarian missions. DOD granted its permission on September 2. MARAD notified the ship managers of Crowley Liner Services and Pacific Gulf Marine to prepare the *Wright* and *Diamond State* for the same humanitarian missions as the school ships. Paul Gilmour, Chief, Division of Ship Maintenance and Repair, coordinated activation issues with regions, ship managers, and general agents.

All hands diligently strove to activate the ships, and to think ahead with respect to what types of relief materiel would be required. Potable water in 5,000 gallon containers and portable cots were added. People even forecasted that rescue efforts would turn into a long-term-relief effort and provided a portable office.

The MARAD Office of Ship Operations offered FEMA its maritime experience and knowledge of vessel capabilities. MARAD personnel from the Central Region were assigned duty at FEMA field offices to help coordinate maritime interests. Susan Schaefer was assigned to Region 6, Tom Mackey to Region 4, and later following Hurricane Rita, Michael Luzinski to the FEMA office in Austin, Texas. At Headquarters, Adrian Jordan became the FEMA coordinator. Many other personnel helped with efforts at U.S. Coast Guard offices and state and local parishes within Louisiana, Mississippi, and later Texas. Kevin Tokarski, Chief, Division of Operations Support, headed the command response from MARAD's Operations Center. Every day, MARAD Central Region personnel and others in the affected area kept Headquarters abreast of the latest developments. Kevin spoke to 20 call-in lines every day, including weekends, for more than a month, listening to each MARAD employee's concerns and providing status reports to both MARAD management and the Department. According to Kevin, "Without those who just kept going without much thought to sleep or recompense and particularly to their families who let them concentrate on

this [Katrina/Rita], we would not have been able to achieve what we did. I've had teams of people, including the Navy reservists, coming up to the plate and far exceeding normal expectations."

Within two weeks after Hurricane Katrina, the Mississippi River brought up the first commercial containership to unload, and recovery efforts were underway, only to be sidetracked by another hurricane – Rita.

Rita took direct aim at the Beaumont Reserve Fleet (BRF), with the eye of

Cape Vincent, since it was nearby and would make first response easier. MARAD said yes. The next day, there were 15 fire trucks ready to go aboard. Crews on the *Cape Vincent* and *Cape Victory* loaded them all and discharged them when the storm had passed.

This time, return to the BRF was a phased event. There is not, even today, enough electricity and housing to meet the needs of MARAD employees who were attempting to return to work. The fleet itself spent three days rounding up LASH barges that were loose in the Neches River. Thirty-one were



Part of MARAD's Watch Team at a daily briefing session with Deputy Maritime Administrator John Jamian (front row: third from left) and other MARAD staff in the MARAD Operations Center located in the DOT Crisis Management Center.

Photo by Ella Thomas

the hurricane passing over Beaumont. Again, Headquarters stood up a weekend watch. Again, the lives of Central Region personnel were thrown into disruption, homes damaged, personnel scattered to families throughout the US, and again, personnel began the regrouping and call-in procedures. However, this time local emergency-response personnel had a better appreciation for MARAD vessels.

A local sheriff asked if he could store his county's fire engines aboard the

hard aground on the banks around the fleet, one sunk, and one was partially sunk. MARAD's National Defense Reserve Fleet vessels anchored together shifted slightly and will have to be restored to their original positions, but the channel was not blocked.

As Bill Cahill, Acting Director, Office of Ship Operations, said on more than one occasion, "We just did what we do all the time. We got the job done together."